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Producing 'responsible' self-governance: Counterinsurgency and the violence of neoliberal rule

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Abstract

This article analyzes western counterinsurgency as a neoliberal assemblage of war, police and government 'at-a-distance'. It will show that based on so-called lessons-learned in Iraq and Afghanistan western counterinsurgency has increasingly shifted towards 'intervention-at-a-distance' aimed at enabling local powerbrokers to become more capable of fighting insurgents, of policing their population and of governing more responsibly. This bears a strong similarity to the old imperial practice of indirect rule. And, just like indirect rule, intervention-at-a-distance rarely if ever succeeds in promoting responsible self-governance. In fact, counterinsurgency-type interventions frequently end up exacerbating the very irresponsible and illiberal types of governance that lead to instability in the first place. The article shows that the coercion and violence of counterinsurgency operations flows directly from its attempts to promote responsible self-governance and from the very likely failure of these attempts. This also has implications for neoliberal rule in general. The conclusion will thus consider whether a critical reading of neoliberal counterinsurgency may also lead to an insurgent reading of neoliberal rule in general.

Keywords

Counterinsurgency, Neoliberalism, Intervention, Police, Imperialism,

Introduction

In his forceful critique of the US military's recent infatuation with counterinsurgency (COIN), military historian Douglas Porch (2013) shows that western population-centric counterinsurgency stands in the brutal tradition of colonial 'small wars':

Therefore, when contemporary COIN practitioners refer to their craft as "war among the people," they inherit a mode of operations that in effect targeted "the people" for assassination, rape, destitution, internment, and intimidation with the goal of depriving the resisters of their support base and indeed of any reason to go on living. (20-21)

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Yet, Porch also writes that 'The idea of counterinsurgency is linked to democracy, and the notion that a government's legitimacy is anchored in the consent of the governed' (3). Indeed, current US and NATO doctrinal publications are replete with references to legitimacy, and repeatedly stress that 'Fostering development of effective governance by a legitimate government that can provide security and acts in the best interests of its people may be essential to countering an insurgency' (US Department of the Army 2014, para 1-78, see also US Department of Defense 2013, I-2-I-3, NATO 2011, paras 0342-0344). So, on the one hand, counterinsurgency is steeped in the small wars tradition of colonial domination, exploitation and brutality, while, on the other, it purportedly aims to promote responsible and legitimate self-governance.

This apparent contradiction between military violence and (neo)liberal governance seems to be based in a tension between what counterinsurgents say they do and what they actually do, between the apparent benevolence of official counterinsurgency rhetoric and the brutality of actual counterinsurgency operations. The contradiction between violence and governance seems, moreover, to be compounded by a tension between counterinsurgency's declared goal of stabilization and the massive instability western counterinsurgency interventions happen to leave behind, as exemplified by the current state of both Iraq and Afghanistan. This article will, however, show that the emphasis on stability and the promotion of good governance is more than just an attempt to justify military intervention. Rather, in line with the illiberalism of (neo)liberal rule in general, coercion and violence, which seem to be the hallmark of counterinsurgency operations, flow directly from (more likely than not, failed) attempts to promote responsible self-governance.

Western counterinsurgency can be understood as a form of neoliberal police targeting the problematized autonomy of foreign populations and states, that is to say their problematized capacity for responsible self-governance. Colleen Bell (2015, 18) observes that the concept of police power can help us read 'Western counterinsurgency as an assemblage of practices that connect violence to order, force to persuasion, civil to military power'. Indeed, 'police' understood not just as the institution of the public police but as a 'broad range of powers through which social order is fabricated and subjects constituted' enables us to critically examine attempts to promote both domestic and

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international order (Neocleous 2014, 10-11). Counterinsurgency shows up that war power and police power are inextricably intertwined, and have perhaps always been (Neocleous 2011, 2015, 2014). A recently published collection of essays (Bachman, Bell, and Holmqvist 2015) usefully suggests that counterinsurgency in particular and Western intervention in general ought to be analyzed under the sign of war:police. Yet, counterinsurgency is not just geared towards policing foreign populations but also towards enabling them to police themselves. Besides violently intervening in foreign states and societies, counterinsurgency is also supposed to respect and even bolster the sovereignty and autonomy of targeted states and their populations. The article thus reads counterinsurgency not just as a combination of war power and police power but also as an expression of neoliberal governmentality, that is to say, as a way of governing with and through the subjects' (in)capacity for self-governance. In short, counterinsurgency operates across the full government, police and war continuum.

The article is divided into two main parts. The first part will argue that although the rationality of police was displaced by a liberal rationality of governance through individual and collective autonomy in the 18th century, police power persists under liberalism in the form of assemblages geared towards, often coercively, shaping individual and collective autonomy. This part will then consider the subtle shift from liberal to neoliberal police, especially in terms of how autonomy is problematized and opened up for intervention. The second part will analyze the current western logic of counterinsurgency as a program for the formation of a neoliberal assemblage of war, police and government. This analysis will focus on formal counterinsurgency doctrine enshrined in official government guides and military field manuals, rather than on the wide range of informal thinking on counterinsurgency in military journals or think tank and academic publications (for the difference between formal and informal doctrine, see Bickel 2001, 5). Although informal doctrine can play a significant role in shaping formal doctrine, and may sometimes fill in for the absence of formal doctrine, official doctrinal publications crystallize an institutionalized rationality of the 'what' and 'how' of counterinsurgency. Officially sanctioned doctrine seeks to distill knowledge about past operations into a 'conduct of the conduct' of future operations. Indeed, this article will read official counterinsurgency doctrine as a normative rationality geared towards

organizing how actual operations are conducted. Yet, the rationality of counterinsurgency is itself structured by the larger political rationalities of police and (neo)liberalism. The article will thus analyze formal counterinsurgency doctrine as a (neo)liberal assemblage of war, police and government, in order to draw out the contradictions inherent in this assemblage. The article will show that based on so-called lessons-learned in Iraq and Afghanistan western counterinsurgency has increasingly shifted towards 'intervention-at-a-distance' aimed at enabling local powerbrokers to become more capable of fighting insurgents, of policing their population and of governing more responsibly. This is strikingly similar to the old imperial practice of indirect rule. And, just like indirect rule these forms of intervention-at-a-distance rarely if ever succeed in promoting responsible self-governance, nor in establishing long-term stability. In fact, counterinsurgency-type interventions (at-whatever-distance!) frequently end up exacerbating the very irresponsible and illiberal types of governance that may lead to instability in the first place. Last but not least, this part examines the epistemic and discursive mechanisms by means of which western counterinsurgents aim to make intelligible both the field and the targets of intervention and how the inevitable limits to this type of knowledge as well as the underlying assumptions may account for the frequent failure of counterinsurgency campaigns. All in all, this part shows that the coercion and violence of counterinsurgency operations is a direct effect of attempts to promote responsible self-governance as well as of the very likely failure of these attempts. This also has implications for neoliberal rule in general. The conclusion will thus consider whether a critical reading of neoliberal counterinsurgency may also lead to an insurgent reading of neoliberal rule in general.

Police power and liberal government

In Continental Europe, starting in the 15th century, the breakdown of feudalism and the associated threat of masterless men no longer fettered by a system of both political and economic domination ushered in a growing obsession with 'police'. 'Police' (police science or *Polizeiwissenschaft*) came to denote 'the legislative and administrative regulation of the internal life of the community to promote general welfare and the condition of good order' (Neocleous 2000, 1). This was primarily a means towards increasing the state's internal and external strength. In fact, the rationality of police is

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closely linked to the principles of sovereignty, *raison d'état* and the rise of an interstate system, as police power was geared towards marshaling the state's resources to increase its competitiveness in relation to other states (Valverde 2008, 28). Under the rationality of police, moreover, state and society were seen as congruent; what was good for the state was also good for society (Neocleous 2000, 11-21, see also Foucault 2007, 311-332, Gordon 1991, 10, Knemayer 1980).

In the 18th century, the 'discovery' of the autonomy of social and economic relations prompted a number of epistemological, technical and ethical attacks on the rationality of police, and ultimately gave rise to a new political rationality: liberalism. Through the discovery of 'political economy' as a distinct field of human activity in the 18th century, prosperity became divorced from the state. Liberal thinkers, such as Adam Smith came to see prosperity as the product of the generalized pursuit of private interest rather than as a consequence of state regulation (Neocleous 2000, 22-29). At roughly the same time, there was also a major shift in ideas about the promotion of happiness. Philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, asked whether a sovereign could or should promote general happiness as he saw fit. Ultimately, this gave rise to the liberal principle of the rule of law and the argument that sovereignty should be limited to protecting the security and freedom of autonomous human agents through the rule of law so that people could freely pursue their own happiness (Neocleous 2000, 30).

So liberal critics pointed out the impossibility to fully grasp the processes of population, especially in terms of economic relations. The limits of the state's knowledge of its population led in turn to questions concerning the effectiveness of state control. Ultimately, this gave rise to the idea that the autonomous pursuit of individual prosperity would lead to more collective prosperity than state policing of economic relations. In a similar vein, the private pursuit of happiness was viewed as leading to more overall happiness than state intervention in people's lives. Liberalism thus marked a shift from a 'police conception of order as a visible grid of communication' to a concern with promoting 'the necessarily opaque, dense, autonomous character of the processes of population' (Gordon 1991, 21). Moreover, epistemological questions concerning the intelligibility of both the field and the targets of government and technical questions of

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how to govern as effectively as possible were reinforced by ethical concerns over how much the state ought to intervene in the lives of its subjects.

In short, liberal political thought 'repudiated *raison d'état* and focused instead on the cultivation of an autonomous civil society' (Neocleous 2000, 33). As Barry Hindess (2005, 394) puts it, 'Liberal political reason sees individual liberty as a limit, if not to the legitimate reach of the state then certainly to its effectiveness'. Ultimately, liberal political thought and liberal political practices are premised on the principle of autonomy, which is held to operate along the dimensions of the individual, society and the state. Individual members of a state's population are considered to be autonomous agents, to the extent that they are deemed to have a capacity for responsible self-governance. At the same time, the interactions of these agents, the sum total of which are thought to comprise both civil society and the economy are also deemed to be autonomous. Last but not least, according to the liberal principle of state sovereignty, states are themselves autonomous agents.

Autonomy and liberal police

But has the logic of liberalism completely displaced the rationality of police? Or can we still find elements of police within liberalism? In fact, there was no rupture between the rationality of police and liberal political reason. The notion of a clear separation between police power and the rule of law is itself part of the normative liberal discourse of the development of western civilization. The history of liberal political practice 'reveals a much more complicated and obscured relationship between rights and powers, contract and coercion, liberty and force, and law and police' (Novak, 2008, 55).

Police practices were modified and transformed according to an increasingly liberal logic of rule (Valverde 2008, 26-27). Attempts to promote order in and through the production of knowledge about populations and their activities persisted in modern liberal societies, but these attempts were now guided by the principle of autonomy. Liberalism ushered in a new form of police based on 'a knowledge of economics, social, and other processes outside the formal sphere of the state rather than on a transparent knowledge of the minutiae of activities, things, and humans' (Dean, 2000: 42). Liberalism demarcated the social from the political, while at the same time constantly intervening in the social in order to monitor and regulate societal processes, so that they can unfold according to what is viewed as their immanently natural course. Liberal political reason became concerned

about governing too much, while still governing enough to ensure the (re)production of an orderly society that allows for the smooth operation of the autonomous processes of population, above all capital accumulation. Liberal government sought to produce a social order that is capable of policing itself: 'the liberal model of policing [...] favours a view of the police as emanating *from* society rather than as a force acting *on* society' (de Larrinaga and Doucet 2015, 68). Yet, not all members of society were seen as equally capable of policing themselves. Some may not yet have acquired a capacity for responsible self-governance and others may never be either willing or able to acquire it (see Rasmussen 2011). Those seen as unable to police themselves, therefore, became the targets of domination, coercion and even violence. For, the development of a capacity for self-governance is, first and foremost, viewed as requiring the submission to authority. After all, 'Subjection is also a condition of freedom; in order to act freely, the subject must first be shaped, guided, and molded into one capable of responsibly exercising that freedom through systems of domination' (Dean 1999, 193, see also Rose 1999, 175). In fact, liberal political thought problematized autonomy. And 'liberal police' denotes the various assemblages geared towards shaping a capacity for responsible self-governance – through the targeted and differential application of a combination of persuasion, coercion and violence. In short, liberal police was not just limited to the protection of life and property within the rule of law but throughout the 19th century also acquires a more positive function of improving the population, of developing the population's capacity for self-governance (Tomlinson, 2008; Novak, 2008). Yet, liberal police no longer treated the population as an undifferentiated mass but seeks to adjust governmental intervention to its targets' perceived capacity for liberal self-governance. Liberal police is a form of differentiated, selective and targeted governance (Valverde and Mopas 2004; Valverde, 2008, 20).

Neoliberal police

But what about neoliberalism? What are the differences between liberal and neoliberal police? These differences hinges on a subtle shift in how autonomy is problematized and opened up for intervention. For classical liberal thought the problematic was as much a lack of autonomy as it was the incapacity to exercise autonomy responsibly, whereas neoliberalism is primarily concerned with an excess of irresponsible autonomy (Foucault

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2008, 129-150). What has also changed is the explanation of why some individuals and/or collectivities are considered more capable of responsible self-governance than others. Classical liberal political thinkers have frequently justified colonial domination by referring to what they saw as irreducible racial differences preventing the colonized from governing themselves in a responsible manner (the domestic poor were also often portrayed in racialized terms). The discourse of cultural difference has now largely displaced the discourse of race 'as an essentializing explanation for inequality', but cultural essentialism can only ever be 'an apologia for economic and social inequalities [that] provides little purchase for regulatory intervention' (Chandler 2010b: 387). However, more recent conceptions of culture as socially constructed have opened up society to 'regulatory intervention'. Neoliberal police now increasingly intervenes in the patterns of social interaction and associational practices of civil society in order to remove what are seen as formal and informal obstacles to the responsible exercise of individual and collective self-governance.

In short, both liberalism and neoliberalism problematize individual and collective autonomy and deploy specific police assemblages to (often coercively) regulate those who are seen as incapable of responsible self-governance – both at home and abroad. Yet, neoliberal police is far more actively engaged in the often illiberal, coercive and even violent removal of formal and informal obstacles to responsible self-governance and in the eradication of forms of autonomy that are considered dangerous. Domestically, particularly in the United States but also in an increasing number of European countries, neoliberal rule now uses a fair amount of coercion and violence to govern the racialized poor. The political and economic crises of the 1960s and 1970s and the neoliberal mode of governance that took shape in response to these crises, mainly driven by a search for new profitability through upward redistribution, have turned the domestic racialized poor into an increasingly disposable population more or less cut off from mainstream society but nonetheless construed as a threat to society. Neoliberal police now has to manage and contain this increasingly disposable population. On the one hand, current workfare regimes seek to promote the racialized poor's autonomy by coercing them into the lowest rungs of the labor market; and on the other, if the excessive autonomy of this surplus population manifests itself in immoral or criminal behavior that is seen as a threat to the

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social order, the racialized poor become the targets of a massively extended penal net (see Wacquant 2009, Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Domestically, neoliberal rule thus coercively promotes autonomy (workfare) and resorts to even more coercion (prison), if targeted populations fail to exercise their autonomy in a responsible manner. Indeed, coercion and violence ought to be seen as an integral part of neoliberal rule both at home and abroad.

We will now see that interventionary counterinsurgency forms a particularly illiberal assemblage of neoliberal war:police:government geared towards intervening in and through the capacity for self-governance of foreign populations *and* states. Moreover, western counterinsurgents adopt both constructivist and essentializing views of a targeted populations' culture and society. Indeed, the essentializing view of host nation culture as irreducibly different is frequently deployed as an apologia for the use of coercion and violence as well as for the overall failures of counterinsurgency interventions.

Counterinsurgency as neoliberal war:police:government

As a neoliberal assemblage of war, police and government, counterinsurgency deploys coercion and violence in the name of autonomy – that is to say, in the name of developing a capacity for responsible self-governance in states and/or populations that are viewed as exercising their autonomy in an irresponsible manner.

The 2014 US Army and Marine Corps field manual (US Department of the Army 2014) defines insurgency and counterinsurgency as follows:

An insurgency is the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. [...] Counterinsurgency is comprehensive civilian and military efforts to defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes. (para 1-3)

This definition raises a number of issues. Firstly, insurgents and counterinsurgents are locked in a struggle over political control, and violence is only one amongst several means through which insurgents 'challenge political control' or through which counterinsurgents seek to reassert political control. Secondly, counterinsurgency requires a so-called whole-of-government approach that 'integrates the collaborative efforts of the departments and agencies of the U.S. government to achieve unity of effort toward a shared goal' (US

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Department of the Army 2014, para 1-41). Thirdly, the goal of counterinsurgency is not just to 'defeat and contain insurgency' but also to 'address its root causes' in order to provide long-term stability to affected regions and to prevent future eruptions of violence.

The 2009 *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (US Government 2009, 1) – a how-to booklet for all US government departments and agencies involved in a whole-of-government approach to countering insurgencies – writes that US counterinsurgency is based on several assumptions: (1) military force is rarely the most decisive factor in the success of a counterinsurgency campaign, although security is important; (2) one of the central goals should be 'the creation of local and national governmental structures that will serve their populations, and over time, replace the efforts of foreign partners'; (3) the significance of 'superior knowledge', especially 'understanding of the "human terrain"'; (4) the need for patience to persevere in protracted conflicts.

The remainder of this article will problematize the second and the third assumption, in particular. These assumptions are at the heart of the success and, rather more likely, failure of counterinsurgency campaigns. The failure to promote affected populations' capacities for self-governance frequently leads to the use of more violence on the part of both the insurgents and the counterinsurgents. What is more, the lack of governmental capacities is often an important factor in the eruption of insurgency in the first place. The lack of superior knowledge of local economic, social and political conditions is, in turn, a central factor in the success or failure of 'the creation of local and national governmental structures'.

The spectrum of interventionary counterinsurgency

As Porch (2013, 76) suggests, 'The colonial worldview, which infuses modern counterinsurgency, requires a global, inchoate threat that makes peripheral wars central, not marginal, to national security.' The war on terror provided such a threat and from 2006 onwards counterinsurgency was widely viewed as a panacea for fighting global terrorism, because it seemed to offer an effective instrument for pacifying and stabilizing the world's badlands which were widely seen as breeding grounds for terrorism (Kilcullen 2005, 2009, 2010; for a critique see Kienscherf 2011, 2013). Yet, despite some rather short-lived successes, counterinsurgency has not really lived up to its promises. Western counterinsurgents have, on all counts, almost completely failed to stabilize either Iraq or

Afghanistan. At the same time, the world was hit by a major economic crisis, and the United States had to plan for some major cuts to a completely overblown defense budget. So, enthusiasm for manpower and resource intensive protracted counterinsurgency interventions has subsided considerably. Even the overarching strategic rationale for counterinsurgency, the global war on terror, seems to have lost some of its urgency. However, although the term, 'global war on terror', has all but disappeared from official discourse, concerns over terror attacks launched from fragile states continue to guide US strategic thinking. So where does that leave counterinsurgency? It seems as if counterinsurgency is no longer relevant to the fight against terrorism, which now apparently relies primarily on direct action against terrorist networks. But precision strikes and special operations forces raids against suspected terrorists are frequently part of a larger attempt to stabilize fragile states through military, political, economic, intelligence and law enforcement assistance¹. According to the 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (US Department of Defense 2014),

Although our forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale prolonged stability operations, we will preserve the expertise gained during the past ten years of counterinsurgency and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. We will also protect the ability to regenerate capabilities that might be needed to meet future demands. [...] The United States will maintain a worldwide approach to countering violent extremists and terrorist threats using a combination of economic, diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, development, and military tools. The Department of Defense will rebalance our counterterrorism efforts toward greater emphasis on building partnership capacity, especially in fragile states, while retaining robust capability for direct action, including intelligence, persistent surveillance, precision strike, and Special Operations Forces. (vii)

¹ In a speech before the Senate Armed Service Committee Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey stated that US strategy against the Islamic State (IS) relied not just on airstrikes but also on a 'whole-of-government' effort to build the capacities of local partners, above all the Iraqi state and to degrade the capacities of IS. He argued that IS could only be defeated if 'their cloak of religious legitimacy is stripped away and the populations on which they have imposed themselves reject them. Our actions are intended to move in that direction' (*The Washington Post* 2014).

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Current US strategy papers thus signal a move towards more indirect approaches to countering global instability (see US Department of Defense 2012, 2014). Large-scale US-led counterinsurgency interventions seem to be off the agenda, at least for the time being. In fact, the US military is now less likely to police and govern foreign populations directly. US military and civilian counterinsurgents now rather seek to intervene at-a-distance so that affected states become capable of governing their own populations in a more responsible and effective manner. For the foreseeable future the very term counterinsurgency will probably remain associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, these campaigns were special cases, because in both conflicts counterinsurgency missions only occurred after the end of conventional combat operations in a situation where US and Allied troops already acted as an occupying force. Most counterinsurgency interventions are far more low-key and do not entail the deployment of large contingents of combat troops.

The 2014 field manual, which is an updated version of the 2006 manual and includes so-called lessons-learned in Afghanistan and Iraq distinguishes between direct and indirect 'methods for countering insurgencies' (US Department of the Army 2014, see also US Department of the Army 2007). Direct US involvement can vary in intensity, 'from a modest force conducting limited missions to a large force that could be, at least for a time, the primary counterinsurgency force' (US Department of the Army 2014, para 9-2). Indirect US involvement consists in merely supporting indigenous efforts either through civil and military assistance or security cooperation (paras 10-3, 10-4, 10-5). The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (US Government 2009) lists five forms of US interventionary counterinsurgency that differ markedly in their level of intrusiveness. These forms of intervention range from 'the deployment of a specialist team to augment the U.S Embassy in the affected country and/or the U.S. Consulate in an affected region of the country' to the large-scale deployment of regular US forces (41, 41-43). The guide stresses that 'For reasons of cost, to minimize any backlash from the population against foreign presence, and to protect the sovereignty of the affected government' US policy makers should choose 'the most indirect and least intrusive form of intervention' that will most likely achieve the desired goal (40). There is, of course, always the risk that if a less intrusive form of intervention fails to bring about the desired results, the US will escalate

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its involvement until it is embroiled in a large-scale and costly military intervention. The guide is aware of this risk and warns that each intervention should be based on a 'thorough and accurate' assessment of the local situation, taking into account that 'most countries significantly underestimate the scale of effort required to defeat an insurgency' (44).

Depending on the level of intrusiveness counterinsurgents seek to act either directly on the actions of affected population or on the actions of the host nation government so that it may act on its population in ways that are supposed to further the counterinsurgents' objectives.

Intervention-at-a-distance

Active US and NATO doctrinal publications envisage a form of intervention-at-a-distance. Western counterinsurgents are supposed to act upon the affected population by acting upon the so-called host nation government or non-state powerbrokers. The current western rationality of counterinsurgency seeks to form an assemblage of war-at-a-distance, police-at-a-distance and government-at-a-distance through: (1) Supporting host nation military operations against insurgent through money, training, equipment and (sometimes) air support; (2) Helping the host nation to better police its population through money, training, equipment as well as longer-term developmental projects to improve infrastructure and basic services; (3) Promoting good governance through advice, development and diplomatic efforts. Counterinsurgency as intervention-at-a-distance thus seeks to act upon states as well as non-state actors so that they become better able to fight insurgents as well as to police and govern their population. Indeed, one of the central aims of western interventionary counterinsurgency is 'to enable the host nation':

The conclusion of any counterinsurgency effort is primarily dependent on the host nation and the people who reside in that nation. Ultimately, every society has to provide solutions to its own problems. As such, one of the Army and Marine Corps' primary roles in counterinsurgency is to enable the host nation. (US Department of the Army 2014, para 1-6, see also US Department of Defense 2013, para III-1, NATO 2011, para 0547)

Even though current western rationalities of counterinsurgency now stress that enabling the host nation should be done at as great a distance as possible, the actual distance of

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western involvement varies. As noted above, there is always the risk that initially quite unobtrusive forms of intervention quickly escalate into full-blown military campaigns.

Based on 'lessons-learned' in Afghanistan and Iraq – especially the failure to establish an effective central government – western rationalities of counterinsurgency seem to have reverted to the old imperial principle of 'indirect rule'. Indirect rule 'through sheiks, maharajas, and tribal chiefs' was a central technique of the colonial 'small wars' tradition, which came to be widely used towards the end of the 19th century as both French and British small warriors and imperialists reacted to the failures of grand projects of imperialist modernization (Porch 2013, 46-60). What is more, even when they were under direct rule, the colonies were invariably governed at-a-distance:

Given the geographical distance between the colonies and the metropolitan European centres, government was inescapably "at a distance" in a rather literal sense. That is to say, to govern the colonies it was necessary to shape and regulate the practices of self-government of those who would govern: the colonial administrators and the colonists. (Rose 1999, 111)

Attempts 'to shape and regulate the practices of self-government of those who would govern', and those who police and fight, for that matter, also characterize contemporary western counterinsurgency (and western intervention in general). But today's counterinsurgents are even further removed from those whose self-government they seek to govern, because its targets are no longer colonial administrators but the officials of, at least nominally, sovereign states and/or local non-state actors, such as warlords or tribal chiefs.

Rose (1999, 49) writes that 'rule "at a distance" becomes possible when each can translate the values of others into its own terms, such that they provide norms and standards for their own ambitions, judgments and conduct.' This is precisely where counterinsurgency's attempts to govern at a distance and to promote responsible self-governance come apart. For, this 'translation' is frequently doomed to fail because relations between Western counterinsurgents, affected governments, their population and the insurgents themselves are more often than not based on mutual distrust and misunderstanding. Their expectations and goals often tend to be incompatible despite, or because of, the use of grand, but ultimately vacuous, terms such as legitimacy and good

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governance. Moreover, host nation government officials, military and police officers as well as local strongmen frequently use (and misuse) external support for their own ends, to enrich themselves or to build up their own power base. For example, the Iraqi Army, which was built up pretty much from scratch by the US after it had been disbanded in the wake of the 2003 invasion, has reportedly become a vast racket used by officers to fill their own coffers. Indeed, this seems to have been a major factor in its dismal performance against the onslaught of the Islamic state (Cockburn 2015, 64-68). At the same time, the US-installed and backed Afghan central government of Hamid Karzai (President of Afghanistan from 2004 to 2014) was plagued by widespread corruption. Hamid Karzai's late half brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, who was a central figure on the Kandahar Provincial Council from 2005 until his assassination on 12 July 2011, was allegedly involved in the opium and heroin trade (Tisdall 2011). Ahmed Wali Karzai was also reported to have received money from the CIA for a variety of services, such as recruitment for the Kandahar Strike Force, a covert paramilitary force trained and run by the CIA (Filkins et al. 2009; Mazzetti 2013, 205-206). One leaked diplomatic cable from the US embassy in Kabul described Ahmed Wali Karzai (AWK) as 'the kingpin of Kandahar' who pretty much ran the whole province 'through a network of political clans that use state institutions to protect and enable licit and illicit enterprises' (US Embassy in Kabul, 2009). Yet, the author of the cable comments:

Initiatives that rely on GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] to take the lead in bringing to justice major corrupt figures or negative influences in Kandahar contain a serious dilemma: they would include some of Karzai's closest relatives and allies and require the prosecution of people on whom we often rely for assistance and/or support. Second, any efforts to bring these individuals to justice could compromise the informal governing networks to which Kandaharis have become accustomed, without necessarily replacing them with effective GIRoA officials or improving the delivery of services.

Indeed, indirect rule through a corrupt host nation government or through local strongmen is rarely if ever a recipe for long-term stability and responsible self-governance.

Knowledge

One of the main problems western counterinsurgents face is their knowledge about those

they seek to rule. After all, 'there is no such thing as "the governed", only multiple objectifications of those over whom government is to be exercised, and whose characteristics government must harness and instrumentalize.' (Rose 1999, 34-6). So how are those that counterinsurgents seek to rule, at whatever distance, objectified? Are they seen as locked into some timeless cultural tradition or are they viewed as rational actors, at least potentially, capable of governing themselves in a responsible manner?

In counterinsurgency, warfare, policing and government depend not only on knowledge of the overall environment and the location of targets therein but also on an understanding of the targets' interests, motivations and forms of social association. Rose's (1999, 7) argument about the relations between knowledge and rule also hold for counterinsurgency:

To rule properly, it is necessary to rule in the light of a knowledge of the particular and specific characteristics that are taken to be immanent to that over which rule is exercised: the characteristics of a land with its peculiar geography, fertility, climate; of a population with its rates of birth, illness, death; of a society with its classes, interests, conflicts, of an economy with its laws of circulation, of supply and demand; of individuals with their passions, interests and propensities for good and evil.

At the same time, technologies and practices of war, police and government need to be self-reflexive. They have to take themselves as objects of knowledge in order to be able to constantly adapt to changes in the targets and their environment. All doctrinal publications on counterinsurgency stress the need for a thorough and constantly updated analysis of the *operational environment*, which is defined as 'a composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander', along the lines of 'eight interrelated variables: political, military, social, information, infrastructure, physical environment, and time' (US Department of the Army 2014, para 2-8). These *operational variables* are then supposed to be combined with *mission variables* for commanders 'to refine their understanding of the situation and to visualize, describe, and direct operations. The mission variables are mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, and civil considerations' (para 2-45). The last variable, civil considerations, which includes six

features: areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people and events (ASCOPE), is supposed to be key to successful counterinsurgency missions (para 2-46). Thus, commanders are required to constantly describe and analyze not just their area of operations and their mission but also how operations undertaken in pursuit of their overall mission affect the operational environment and how changes in the operational environment may affect the overall mission as well as any single operation.

Terms such as *operational environment*, analytical technologies such as *operational variables*, *mission variables*, *ASCOPE*, as well as the intellectual and technical machinery deployed in the actual production of these analyses can be understood as 'discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics' (Rose 1999, 33). Military efforts to carve out an intelligible space and obtain knowledge about its specific characteristics through 'intelligence preparation of the battlefield' and 'analysis of the operational environment', in order to intervene in it and shape it according to certain military *and* political objectives form an integral part of counterinsurgency manuals (US Department of the Army 2009, 1.1-1.25, 2014, 2.1-2.10, US Department of Defense 2010, IV.1-IV.28, NATO 2011, 2.1-2.19, 4.1-4.15, U.S. 2009, 36-7, 45-8). Alongside these formalized discursive technologies, western counterinsurgents have also deployed a number of other techniques for producing knowledge of the targeted population. For example, Human Terrain Teams, civilian social scientists embedded with military units, have been deployed in both Afghanistan and Iraq to gather knowledge of the civilian population and integrate that knowledge into military attempts to describe and map the 'human terrain' of military operations (González 2009, Zehfuss 2012). The use of biometrics, such as iris scanning, fingerprinting or facial recognition, both for controlling the civilian population and for identifying insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan is another example (Bell 2015, 25). Once a counterinsurgency intervention is underway – at whatever level of western involvement – efforts to make the population intelligible serve a variety of purposes: rolling out services to the population in order to win their 'hearts and minds', separating the population from the insurgents through often highly coercive population control mechanisms; and finding and killing insurgents who hide amongst the population.

Yet, some of these technologies can only be fully deployed if there is a sizable western military presence on the ground. But how to identify the complex military, political, social, economic, etc. processes that drive an insurgency, if western powers are only indirectly involved? What is more, on the basis of what knowledge can western policy makers decide whether or not to become involved in the first place? The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* prescribes an inter-agency analysis and planning process that is analogous to military 'intelligence preparation of the battlefield' and 'analysis of the operational environment', but even further removed from the object(s) of knowledge, as it is all done from Washington. The analysis and planning process consists of six steps: 'Assessment of the situation', 'Formulation of policy', 'Development of strategy', 'Integrated planning', 'Implementation', 'Continuous monitoring, evaluation and assessment' (U.S. 2009, 36). These steps serve in turn:

- To carve out an intelligible problem space 'with specifiable limits and particular characteristics' (Rose 1999, 33);
- To decide whether or not it is worth intervening therein;
- If intervention seems to be called for, to decide on the most appropriate tools of intervention (level of US involvement – see above);
- To plan the actual intervention across different governmental departments and to coordinate with international partners;
- To deploy the designated tools of intervention and
- To constantly reflect on how the intervention affects the problem space in order to be able to adapt accordingly (U.S. 2009, 36-48)

Knowledge of the overall problem space produced both before and during an intervention is marked by a tension between a transcendent and an immanent epistemology. On the one hand, counterinsurgents (and this includes both policy makers and personnel on the ground) seek to adopt a transcendent, 'gods-eye' perspective to construct an intelligible problem space where everything is immediately transparent and can hence be targeted with whatever interventionary tool is deemed most appropriate. This type of knowledge production is perfectly in line with the traditional military focus on hierarchical command and control and finds its clearest manifestation in the targeting process. What is more, this transcendent epistemology seeks to impose a 'police conception of order as a visible grid

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of communication' on the problem space of insurgency (Gordon 1991, 21). Yet, on the other hand, counterinsurgents are also supposed to operate in and through 'the necessarily opaque, dense, autonomous processes of population', as they seek to promote responsible self-governance (Gordon 1991, 21). This immanent epistemology seeks to understand the host nation according to what is seen as its own autonomous characteristics in order to determine, and hence work on, with, through and towards, locally acceptable rules, norms and conventions. For example, all active doctrinal publications enjoin counterinsurgents to look at issues such as coercion and corruption through the eyes of the population so that locally acceptable levels can be established and/or maintained (US Department of the Army 2014, para 1-30, US Department of Defense 2013, III-2-III-3, NATO 2011, paras 0342-0344).

Counterinsurgents, however, constantly run up against the limits of their knowledge of the problem spaces they are intervening in. Both efforts to construct a perfectly intelligible problem space amenable to outside intervention and attempts to understand a targeted society's own immanent and autonomous characteristics frequently fail. Limited knowledge, wrong assumptions and blatant misinformation affect both western personnel directly participating in counterinsurgency operations and, perhaps even more, policymakers who try to understand complex local dynamics in far-flung places so that they can decide whether or not or to what extent they should intervene in the internal conflicts of other countries. These inevitable limits to knowledge and understanding are an important factor in the persistent failure of interventionary counterinsurgency.

'Responsible' self-governance

Besides targeting insurgents or helping host nation security forces in doing so, western counterinsurgents seek to intervene in indigenous processes of population in order to steer them towards what are seen as more responsible forms of autonomy. Sometimes they do so directly but more often than not they do so 'at-a-distance', by means of trying to shape the conduct of local powerbrokers so that they become better able to conduct the conduct of the local population. Western counterinsurgents can thereby adopt both a constructivist and an essentializing view of host nation society and culture. What is more, their view of host nation society and culture often changes, according to how successful their attempts

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to promote responsible self-governance are. If their intervention seems to be failing, they frequently tend to view the local population as locked into a timeless barbaric tradition. And, in the much more unlikely case their actions are successful they tend to adopt a more constructivist view of local culture and society. The tension between an essentializing and a constructivist view of host nation society and culture aligns with a contradiction between attempts to civilize, modernize and democratize targeted societies and forms of exerting control through local proxies, even if their actions happen to fly in the face of western liberal ideas about responsible governance.

Current doctrinal publications are indeed haunted by these dilemmas. The 2014 US manual (US Department of the Army 2014, para 1-78), for instance, stresses that legitimate governance which is responsive to and meets the needs of the population is a decisive factor in defeating an insurgency. This clearly chimes with Western ideas about good governance – governance that is ultimately based in popular consent. But, on the other hand, the manual also suggests that not everybody needs the same level of consent:

Coercive methods can damage legitimacy if the methods cannot be justified under the values and norms of the population. However, counterinsurgents should not think of coercion and consent as counter forces to one another. If coercive acts by the government or insurgency are justifiable under the norms and values of the population, those acts do not necessarily undermine the legitimacy of the government or host nation. Acts by both the government and the insurgency must be viewed from the perspective of the population experiencing those acts and not from an outside perspective that will bring its own bias to viewing actions of the host government or insurgency. (1-30)

This view easily collapses into assumptions that due to either irreducible cultural difference or particular historical path dependencies some people accept and hence also require more coercion than others. This is a form of cultural relativism that easily translates into essentializing assumptions about Orientalized others who need to be ruled with an iron fist. The use of tribal militias as local police forces in Afghanistan – a 'wholly undemocratic and illiberal approach to administering the local population' (Belcher 2015, 111) – exemplifies a tendency to view targeted populations as prisoners of a closed, irreducibly different and pathologically violent cultural tradition (see Gregory 2008).

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Indeed, the use of tribal police forces can be seen as 'an attempt by an imperial power to mobilize tribal people in the defence of colonialism' (Hakimi 2013, 389). At the same time, 'the prominence given to customary institutions and non-state actors problematizes the dominant liberal notions of peace-building and state-building based on state sovereignty and monopoly on violence' (389). This points to an unresolved, and perhaps even unresolvable, paradox at the heart of western counterinsurgency, namely 'the old dilemma of seeking to modernize societies versus respecting tradition and local particularities, a tension that remains at the heart of counterinsurgency today' (Porch 2013, 57).

Producing some semblance of social order in fragile states through the elimination of disorder and the promotion of capacities for 'responsible' self-governance is the key rationale of counterinsurgency. But what type of order does Western counterinsurgency seek to produce? Does it aim to produce liberal capitalist states whose governments are representative of and responsive to the population and only minimally interfere in civil society? Or does it merely seek to establish localized politico-military control, even if this entails violent and repressive actions against the population, as it all too often does? In fact, counterinsurgents frequently wind up supporting local strongmen who are merely out to line their own pockets and prey on the population in doing so. In short, western counterinsurgents all too often promote forms of self-governance that are all but responsible. Recent US-led counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan clearly exemplify the tendency towards tolerating, supporting or even promoting blatantly illiberal and coercive forms of local self-governance. After efforts to promote a stable central Afghan government capable of providing security, development and good governance for the whole country had failed, US counterinsurgents prescribed increasingly local 'solutions' to the problem of insecurity in the provinces. One such 'solution' was the establishment of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) as an armed defense force at the village level (Vincent et al. 2015). Yet, the ALP was just a more formalized local security initiative. In fact, US special operations forces (SOFs) and the CIA have established local militias as counterinsurgency auxiliaries at least since 2007 (Goodhand and Hakimi 2014, 10). As Goodhand and Hakimi (2014) argue, 'In many places, the ALP label became a seal of approval to legitimize existing local militias that SOFs often set up

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outside any agreed framework' (13). A 2011 Human Rights Watch report documented numerous human rights abuses by members of the ALP. These include threats, intimidation, unlawful detention, disappearances, extrajudicial killings and sexual abuse (Human Rights Watch 2011). A more recent Human Rights watch report (Human Rights Watch 2015) documents several cases of Afghan strongmen who have committed egregious human rights abuses with impunity. Many of these local powerbrokers and/or militia commanders have been, and sometimes continue to be, at least tolerated if not supported by the Afghan central government and its American and international backers – some even held or still hold positions within the Afghan government:

Since the defeat of the Taliban government in late 2001, both the Afghan government and its international allies and donors have subordinated human rights and governance to short-term political and security objectives. Rampant corruption, carried out systematically by officials and others more concerned with self-enrichment than national interests—and fueled by international assistance as well as the operations of foreign military forces deployed in Afghanistan—effectively sustains rights abusers while blocking efforts to bring them to justice (2).

If the modernizing 'hearts and minds, good governance, state-building exercise' fails (as it all too often does), western counterinsurgents frequently revert to another more limited imperial practice, namely 'indirect rule' through local powerbrokers, such as tribal chiefs, military strongmen or corrupt government officials with all the brutality that this may entail (Porch 2013: 58). On the one hand, western counterinsurgency continues to be informed by universal and normative liberal ideas of what good governance and societal stability ought to look like; and, on the other, it often resorts to illiberal practices of supposedly local and customary governance. Western counterinsurgency is torn between a dynamic view of host nation culture as socially constructed and an essentializing view of irreducible and ultimately static cultural difference. If counterinsurgents fail to shape local institutional frameworks in such a way as to remove formal and informal obstacles to what they see as responsible governance, the essentializing view tends to come to fore. The failure of fostering responsible self-governance can thus be blamed on the illiberalism and the irreducible culture difference of the host nation society and its government. As the

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2013 *Joint Publication 3-24 Counterinsurgency* (US Department of Defense 2013: III-1) has it, 'an outside actor (e.g. USG) cannot fully compensate for a lack of will, incapacity, or counterproductive behavior on the part of the supported HN government'.

Conclusion

Based on lessons drawn from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, western rationalities of counterinsurgency have shifted towards more indirect forms of intervention. Western counterinsurgents now frequently aim to promote 'responsible' self-governance by acting on the actions of local rulers – both government officials and non-state agents. The current trend towards intervention-at-a-distance is reminiscent of the old imperial practice of indirect rule. Yet, indirect rule through local intermediaries rarely results in responsible self-governance. Both host nation officials and non-state agents, supported by western counterinsurgents, frequently engage in graft, corruption, crime and even violence against the population. Indirect rule is thus rarely if ever a recipe for stability but often ends up exacerbating the very irresponsible and illiberal types of governance that may lead to instability in the first place. In the colonial period, 'Small wars became a vehicle for the creation of fragile, under-administered territories that relied on the coercion and exploitation of the population to survive' (Porch 2013, 126). Remarkably, counterinsurgency, whose central goal is to pacify and stabilize 'fragile, under-administered territories', draws on the same set of rationalities and practices that have massively destabilized huge swaths of the global south in the first place.

Counterinsurgency shows up the coercive and violent underpinnings of (neo)liberal rule – not only in the global south but also at home. Practices of war:police:government deployed abroad also tend to have massive repercussions at home. The development of metropolitan liberal rule has been shaped by experiences of colonial domination. Rationalities and practices of colonial rule have, in fact, often boomeranged back to be used against 'dangerous' populations in the metropolis (Arendt 1973, 155, Césaire 1972, 5, Foucault 2003, 103, Rose 1999, 107-119, see also Porch 2013):

[I]n a kind of internal racism, the problem of governing the urban poor, slum children, the dangerous classes, the degenerates and the unemployables was often

considered to be analogous to that of governing the uncivilized, or only potentially civilized, inhabitants of the colonies. (Rose 1999, 110-111)

There are also numerous examples of how counterinsurgency techniques, developed for use in the global south, have been re-imported into the Continental United States (see, for instance, Bigart 1968, Halloran 1971, Kienscherf 2014, NARMIC and Flitcraft 1971, Pyle 1970, Parenti 1999, Williams 2011).

Coercion and violence are frequently seen as the other of (neo)liberal rule. Yet, as the analysis of counterinsurgency shows, coercion and violence are necessary to (neo)liberal rule. Indeed, the very principle of autonomy on which (neo)liberal rule is premised entails the use of coercion and violence against those who are viewed as exercising their autonomy irresponsibly. Political instability in general and insurgencies in particular are treated as clear symptoms of irresponsible self-governance. This is seen as requiring outside intervention so that symptoms can be treated and root causes addressed. This means eliminating irresponsible behavior and either steering the affected states and their populations towards more responsible self-governance or directly ruling the affected population until they can do so on their own. However, developing people's capacity for responsible self-governance through external intervention is bound to fail. And, it is precisely in its failure to promote autonomy that (neo)liberal rule resorts to violence on a mass scale. Thus, (neo)liberal rule relies on coercion and violence both in its attempts to promote autonomy and even more so when these attempts fail. And failure is the rule rather than the exception.

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